



Social Development and Housing

FOSTER CARE REVIEW SUMMARY



Introduction

Foster care is defined as a planned, goal directed service in which the temporary protection and nurturing of children takes place in the homes of approved foster families.¹ Foster care is part of the child welfare system, which is the system responsible for ensuring that all children are living in “safe, permanent, and stable environments that support their well-being.”² Foster parenting is critical to the care of certain high risk children, and high turnover rates amongst these caregivers can result in an increased risk to not only the children who are dependent on alternative caregivers for their safety, but to the entire child welfare system itself.³

The Foster Care Review (“the Review) presents information regarding Prince Edward Island’s Foster Care Program (“the Program) and includes findings and recommendations identified and developed by the Foster Care Review Steering Committee (“the Committee”) pertaining to Prince Edward Island’s Program. This Review is meant to serve as a guide for future enhancement and refinements to the Program and to illustrate the excellent work done to date by foster parents and CFS staff in protecting and supporting children in care.

Background

The Program is part of Child Protection Services in the Division of Child and Family Services (“CFS”), Department of Social Development and Housing (“the Department”) of the Government of Prince Edward Island

In Prince Edward Island the Child Protection Act (“the Act”), provides the legislative framework for the provision of foster care services on Prince Edward Island and the mandate for programs and services related to the Program within CFS.

In 1983, the PEI Federation of Foster Families (“the Federation”) was established as an independent non-governmental body that is run by foster parents, for foster parents, in order to serve and support each other as caregivers. The Federation provides the collective voice for foster parents throughout Prince Edward Island with the objective of maintaining a partnership and clear lines of communication between foster parents and staff of CFS, on behalf of children requiring foster care.

The Federation collaborates with the Canadian Foster Family Association (“CFFA”), whose mandate is to provide a voice for foster families across Canada and to foster collaboration amongst provincial and territorial foster family associations, as well as organizations involved with children in care in order to enhance foster care across Canada.

¹ Child Welfare League of America. “Family Foster Care Program” (2007). Retrieved, from CWLA Website: <http://www.cwla.org>.

² Hick & Stokes, “Social Work in Canada”, (2017).

³ Daniel, “Foster Cultural Development: Foster Parents’ Perspectives” (2011).

CFS recognizes the need for a Program that is premised on a supportive and collaborative partnership between the CFS and foster parents in order to ensure the best outcomes for Island children. CFS further recognizes that support for foster families has a direct impact on outcomes for children in care.

In November 2017, the Foster Care Review Steering Committee was formed to provide overall support, oversight and leadership to guide a collaborative approach to review the Program, guided and supported by critical thinking, visionary and strategic deliberations, openness, transparency, effective communication, inclusive and respectful dialogue and the best interests of children.

Rona Smith, Director of CFS, and Wendi James Poirier, President of the Federation were asked to co-chair the Committee which was comprised of representatives from CFS, the Federation and the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of Prince Edward Island ("the Confederacy"). The members of the Committee included:

- Fred Devries - Vice-President, PEI Federation of Foster Families
- Sheila Whiteway - Secretary, PEI Federation of Foster Families
- Mary Noye - Treasurer, PEI Federation of Foster Families
- Marilyn Birch - Director of Child & Family Services, Confederacy
- Cathy Ada - Child Protection Resource Supervisor, Child and Family Services
- Alice Maund - Child Protection Resource Supervisor, Child and Family Services
- Wendy McCourt - Director of Child Protection, Child and Family Services
- Mike Gaudet - Provincial Coordinator of Residential Services, Child and Family Services
- Jeannine Carver – Provincial Manager of Child Protection Services, Child and Family Services
- Kelly Peck – Provincial Manager of Children's Services, Child and Family Services
- Penny Woodgate - Administrative Assistant, Child and Family Services
- Michael Zimmerman – Legal and Policy Advisor, Child and Family Services

The Committee was accountable to the Deputy Minister of the Department for the work identified in this provincial Program review and the President of the Federation was responsible for providing regular reports to the Federation's membership.

The Review is premised on a strength-based approach with the aim of strengthening the partnership between the Federation and Government. Prince Edward Island is Canada's smallest province and due to its unique Island geography, has a strong sense of community and citizens who are highly engaged in civic activism. It is within this environment that the Program has been met with great success in providing nurturing and loving homes to children in care.

This Review presents information regarding Prince Edward Island's Program and includes findings and recommendations identified and developed by the Committee pertaining to Prince Edward Island's Program. This Review is meant to serve as a guide for future enhancement and refinements to the Program and to illustrate the excellent work done to date by foster parents and CFS staff in protecting and supporting children in care.

Consultation Process

The Committee sought to develop an approach to consultation which provided an opportunity to strengthen child-centered services on behalf of children in the legal custody and guardianship of the province and those children who are living in foster care homes.

The Committee strived to create opportunities for input and participation by children, foster parents and employees of CFS to support the communication of information to and from the Federation and CFS as well as to facilitate inclusive opportunities for the participation of children in care and other care providers providing living arrangements for children involved with CFS.

The Committee worked together to draft questions to guide the consultation process. The Committee discussed at great lengths the importance of having broad questions to facilitate applicability to a continuum of audiences, recognizing the importance of being able to theme feedback to the questions and form recommendations for the final Report while also ensuring focus on foster parents, children in care and working relationships between foster parents and CFS staff. The Committee also agreed that consistent communication and flexibility were crucially important.

Participants chose one or more of the various methods of responding offered by the Committee that were most suitable to a person's specific situation or level of comfort. The method chosen depended upon whether the participant was a foster parent, a child who was presently or had been in care (including Indigenous children) or a member of CFS.

The Federation was tasked with contacting its members and inquired how they would best like to be engaged for the review process. The Federation reported to the Committee that most foster parents preferred to have a questionnaire emailed to them or to answer a questionnaire at a cluster meeting.

Foster parents were then provided opportunities to participate in the review through written submissions, private sessions and facilitated engagement sessions at the Spring Symposium (2018). The deadline for all foster parent submissions was April 30, 2018.

Kelly Peck, Manager of Children's Services within CFS was the contact person for all submissions and/or questions and foster parents were provided with both her email and phone number.

Mike Gaudet, Residential Services Coordinator within CFS, provided leadership in planning two events for children in care, to elicit their opinions and feedback for the consultation process. One event was held in Summerside and one was held in Charlottetown for children in foster care ages 8 – 18 years.

Feedback was elicited from staff who provided services to children in group homes and/or foster care. The Residential Services Coordinator also coordinated with staff of Residential Services for each group home to host an opportunity for Youth Worker led engagement sessions.

The Residential Services Coordinator drafted age appropriate guiding questions building on questions used for child engagement throughout the Child Protection Act Review.

Facilitators of the small group sessions were guided by a Foster Care Facilitator's Small Group Guide that included information on how sessions are to be conducted as well as the guiding questions to be used to facilitate conversation. Small group sessions were held with children who were presently or had been in care (including Indigenous children), foster parents, and CFS staff.

What We Heard

During the consultation process, there were many personal experiences shared from a diverse range of perspectives on the Program, from children who are in or who were in care, foster parents and staff of CFS. Emerging from the data, the Committee developed major themes to help guide this Review. Major themes are broken down into subthemes based on an organizing framework agreed upon by the Committee.

Theme 1: Voice of Children and their Experiences

Comments related to this theme reflect the desire of children in care, foster parents and staff of CFS to ensure that children are consulted and heard when decisions are made that affect them and that children are given the opportunity to flourish in a nurturing and caring environment that supports them as they transition to adulthood.

Each child or youth residing in a foster home in Prince Edward Island has unique needs depending on a range of factors including age, cultural background, mental, emotional and physical stage of development. Some children and youth require specialized supports to address specific medical, psychological or developmental conditions. Recognizing that the needs of each child and youth are unique, the foster care service delivery system must be based on a 'child-centred' approach that is designed to support foster parents to meet the specific needs of children and youth in their care. This includes providing supports and training to foster families to effectively meet these specific needs.

Rights of children need to be balanced within the requirement of protecting a child's privacy and their safety and security. The Director of Child Protection and Government have a legal responsibility to protect children in care as the public guardian for these children and there is a high onus of responsibility and expectation of the Director and Government to provide safe and nurturing environments for some of Prince Edward Island's children.

Theme 2: Supports for Children

Comments related to this theme reflect the degree of trauma experienced by children in care as a result of abuse and neglect and the need for a collaborative and concerted partnership between CFS and foster families in order to provide services and supports that children require to meet their developmental needs. A theme within all forms of data collection for this consultation process was a feeling that CFS and foster parents could improve working relationships and that foster parents' sense a lack of recognition for the work that they do and desire role clarity and greater consistency with CFS staff.

Foster parents reported deficiencies in the quality, timeliness and delivery of information from CFS to foster parents and a lack of inclusion in the case planning process. Foster parents stated that this impedes foster parents from effectively fulfilling their roles that affects the level of support that they can provide a child. Many foster parents indicated that their relationship with CFS and its supervisors needs to be improved and that they do not feel recognized as having a legitimate and valuable role on the team.

Relationship building and improved supports for foster parents will invariably improve the care provided to children who are in a foster home. The Committee believes that if foster children, foster parents and CFS are grounded in a common vision, philosophy and objectives for the Program, they will be able to apply consistent practices and provide consistent information regarding a fostering experience.

The Committee believes that consistently engaging children and foster families in the case planning process for children and youth in foster care placements is acknowledged as an important component of solid child welfare practice. In order for Prince Edward Island's foster care system to succeed in the long term, policies and procedures must be grounded in a recognition that children are more likely to thrive and foster parents are more likely to continue fostering when they are provided regular opportunities for input into program administration and case planning decisions.

Theme 3: Cultural Supports for Children

Comments related to this theme reflect the need to provide the best quality care for children and youth that reflects each child's unique cultural heritage. Children in care in Prince Edward Island come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Given this diversity, it is necessary to have a pool of resource families reflective of the culture of children in care, including their linguistic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. The Committee believes that where a linguistic, ethnic or cultural match cannot be made between the foster child or youth and their foster family, it is important that the foster home be provided with the supports required to ensure that the quality of care provided is culturally competent.

Given the increased number of children from racialized groups requiring foster care and the low number of foster parents from racialized groups, transcultural foster placements are on the rise. Addressing racial and cultural diversity within the context of transcultural foster care placements is one of the most pressing dilemmas of contemporary child protection practice.

Children and youth have a legal right to feel connected to their culture and to be supported to participate in cultural activities; this will have a direct impact on their successful transition to adulthood. It is necessary for foster parents, as well as staff of CFS to receive the training and supports required to develop cultural competence and meet the cultural needs of the children in their care. Children from racialized groups, coming into foster care, have specific needs related to cultural development that foster parents and CFS must support. Under the Act, children have a right to have their cultural, racial, linguistic and religious heritage respected and Indigenous children have a right to preserve their cultural identity.⁴

⁴ Child Protection Act, RSPEI 1988, c C-5.1, Preamble.

Understanding how cultural values, beliefs and traditions of foster parents are related to promoting cultural development is critical because a substantial proportion of children in foster care are from racialized groups, particularly of Indigenous heritage. Foster parents fostering children and youth from racialized groups have unique needs and may require assistance to address the cultural differences within their home and communities.⁵ Without a family and community that is sensitive to these issues and able to facilitate a healthy transition, a racialized child could become confused about their identity. It stands to reason that the need to provide adequate training and support for foster parents increases, as the needs of children entering the foster care system becomes more culturally specific. Culturally appropriate supports for children reduce or avoid placement breakdowns, which can lead to increased retention rates and decreased attrition rates.

Recommendations

During the consultation process, it was clear to the Committee that the parties firmly believe in the value and utility of the Program and that CFS and foster parents are dedicated professionals who provide critically important supports to children in care. It was also clear to the Committee that the parties believe that the Program is functional, but there is room for improvement. An overarching theme during the consultation process was the need to modernize and update the Program in line with modern realities of society.

A key observation made by the Committee was the critical importance of the Program in providing support and a nurturing environment for children in care. All parties commented on the benefits of the Program in ensuring that children have the opportunity to flourish and are provided access to supports and resources that ensure that when children age out of care, they are prepared to live independently.

The Committee noted that given the complex nature of family dynamics and the varying and individual needs of the parties involved with the Program, that each case is unique and individualized. The variability of experiences in relation to the Program makes it difficult to draw generalizations with respect to the Program's operations. The Committee notes that the realization of the complexity of any new program and policy direction taken by CFS administration on a go forward basis must include the Federation in order to ensure that the diverse and personal perspectives shared with the Committee are heard and actioned.

In order to address issues heard during the consultation process as well as other issues of concern identified by the Committee with respect to the operation and administration of the Foster Care Program, the Committee prepared recommendations under the categories of Foster Families, Children in Care and Working Relationships. The Committee recommends that a working group be established to action the recommendations of this Review, with representation from both CFS and the Federation. A summary of the recommendations is contained below:

⁵ Daniel, "Foster Cultural Development: Foster Parents' Perspectives", (2011).

Foster Families

1. The Committee recommends that a new mentorship program be developed by CFS in partnership with the Federation in order to support and encourage new foster parents and to keep experienced foster parents engaged and active.
2. The Committee recommends that CFS adopt and provide Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) training to prepare foster parents to work with other team members to ensure a child's safety, wellbeing, and permanency for each child in the foster care system.
3. The Committee recommends that CFS and the Federation partner to develop a Handbook that provides a framework for foster parenting. This will help ensure that foster parents have access to the most recent and up-to-date information with respect to the policies and procedures of the Program.
4. The Committee recommends that CFS' Recruitment and Retention Committee be expanded and invite more members of the Federation to sit on the Committee and that the Committee formalize its operations by drafting terms of reference and working towards long term goals through a strategic plan.
5. The Committee recommends that CFS reevaluate the compensation model of the Program and in particular evaluate age categories of children in relation to maintenance fees and special expense categories.
6. The Committee recommends that CFS implement therapeutic foster homes that are available to children in care for 24/7 support, treatment intervention, crisis stabilization and connection to the community and school. The Committee further recommends that the working group evaluate and propose what alternative care models could look like on Prince Edward Island.
7. The Committee recommends that CFS reevaluate the scope and role of foster parents, given the changing needs of children coming into care. The Committee recommends that specific focus be placed on role clarity and the scope of foster parents and involve foster parents in the decision making process in relation to foster children in their care.
8. The Committee recommends that CFS and the Federation conduct research into the experiences of foster parents who are fostering in other provinces in Canada, with particular focus on access to supports for foster parents and how compensation is provided.
9. The Committee recommends that CFS explore providing additional afterhours support to foster families, who may need assistance and advice outside of office hours. The Committee notes that creating a mentoring system outlined in recommendation 1 above, may address this recommendation.
10. The Committee recommends that CFS evaluate the process in which payment authorizations are made to ensure that foster parents receive reimbursements in a timely manner.
11. The Committee recommends that compensation rates for respite care be reviewed based on practices in other Canadian provinces/territories and further recommends that compensation for respite be increased.
12. The Committee recommends that CFS explore an arrangement through a volunteer driver program, a private transportation company or through the school board's existing

transportation resources, contracted to provide a vehicle and transportation services, to assist foster parents in transporting foster children. The Committee notes that there are times when foster parents may have multiple children living in their home and there can be conflicts with children's' medical appointments and extracurricular activities.

Children in Care

13. The Committee recommends that Government start collecting, tracking and analyzing data in relation to the number of times a child is transitioned while in care (including placement times), in order to monitor the number of times a child is moved while in care and to develop case plans that try to minimize the total number of times a child is moved while in care.
14. The Committee recommends that partnerships should be strengthened between child protection staff, foster parents and residential services, with specific focus on establishing a formal process between CFS and the Federation to discuss, at the earliest opportunity, a plan for children who are able to be placed in a foster home, rather than continue to reside in a group home.
15. The Committee recommends that CFS evaluate the process in which payment authorizations are made to ensure that children receive authorizations to attend extracurricular in a timely manner.
16. The Committee recommends that CFS conduct research into establishing a new program (as outlined in recommendation 12) to help provide transportation supports to foster children to ensure that they are able to attend extracurricular activities and cultural events that promote linkages with their ethnic/cultural background (for example Powwows).
17. The Committee recommends that the Program continue and expand upon the Program's child centered approach by ascertaining children's wishes and feelings by communicating appropriately in terms of age, language, ethnicity and ability and ensuring that children maintain a connection with their birth family, if it is in the child's best interests.
18. The Committee recommends that CFS institute proactive care plans for children in collaboration with foster parents in order to determine what supports the foster family could help provide to a child in order to ensure that the child is able to help transition back into their natural home environment smoothly.
19. The Committee recommends that CFS explore innovative ways to provide supports to children, such as Residential Services staff assisting in the provision of 1-1 support to a foster child with complex needs, by providing respite services or individualized coaching and intervention services.
20. The Committee recommends that CFS and the Federation implement a process for the effective participation of children in care planning and their participation and development of programs and services created for children, in order to ensure that children's voices are heard and respected.
21. The Committee recommends that CFS ensure that all children coming into care have the opportunity to have a period of introduction with prospective foster parents wherever possible, where the child has an opportunity to share their interests with the proposed foster parents.

CFS should endeavor to collect information about a child's needs, likes and dislikes, as expressed by the child directly, and provide them to foster parents before a placement commences.

22. The Committee recommends that CFS explore providing additional supports to foster parents to allow children to remain with their foster parents beyond the age of 18 even though they may not be attending postsecondary education, as many children in care are unable to live independently once they reach the age of 18. The Committee further recommends CFS and the Federation collaborate to identify training and life skills coaching that would support children in care as they transition to adulthood.
23. The Committee recommends that CFS assess the uptake of the new transitional housing planned for construction in Charlottetown, and explore whether there is a need to establish transitional housing in other regions of Prince Edward Island.
24. The Committee recommends that policies and procedures be adopted as well as information materials for foster parents and children that serve as a guide and resource inventory for the various support programs that children aging out of care may access.
25. The Committee recommends that CFS explore the provision of prevention and early intervention services by providing appropriate, targeted and child specific resources to support children in care.
26. The Committee recommends that the Child Protection Act be researched and potential amendments introduced that grant wider latitude to CFS in offering services to children and their families who might be experiencing hardship but do not fit the requirements of the Act for a child to be found in need of protection, with a specific focus on prevention, early intervention and extended services.

Working Relationships

27. The Committee recommends that CFS ensure that regular planning meetings are occurring between CFS, foster parents and where appropriate, other professionals who provide services to children in care.
28. The Committee recommends that CFS consider formalizing liaisons between foster families and CFS and that CFS staff have regular meetings with the Federation to advise on staffing changes, and to share information regarding changes in programming, policy and trainings so that the Federation can report back to its members.
29. The Committee recommends that CFS modernize and update program policies by, including the annual operating contract between CFS and the Federation. The Committee further recommends that CFS explore hiring a dedicated resource to lead the development and renewal of the policies and procedures related to the Program and that a process be established for a joint program review to be conducted every five years by the Federation and CFS, with the review being submitted to the Minister.
30. The Committee recommends that the working group explore identifying and organizing trainings that would best support foster parents providing care to children with varying and specific needs. This could be facilitated by CFS collecting data from children in care to identify the needs of its children and then facilitating training that meets identified needs, as well as foster parents identifying trainings that they believe would assist them in providing care to foster children. The

Committee believes that this could assist foster parents in obtaining supports that would allow them to accept placements of children with varying and complex needs. The Committee notes that where possible and relevant, foster parents and CFS staff (including staff of Residential Services) should take trainings together.

31. The Committee recommends that CFS research and adopt support models centred on helping foster parents cope and navigate an allegation of neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse made against them, for example the Caregiver Allegations Support Team (CAST) model used in Alberta.
32. The Committee recommends a continued and expanded collaborative partnership with the Indigenous community (including Elders) and foster parents. Indigenous children in care have their unique identities respected and promoted, with a focus on establishing a formal partnership on placements for Indigenous children including mandatory cultural plans and assessment models for foster care that are based on an Indigenous worldview and ensuring that more programming and cultural resources for foster parents are developed.

The Committee also found that during the consultation process most participants found that the current Program is functional and meets acceptable standards. However, the parties did identify areas for improvement particularly in ensuring that policy and procedure components are modernized and regularly accessed and updated, that experienced foster parents are recruited and retained and provided with child specific training opportunities, and strengthening the collaborative relationship between foster parents and CFS.

The Committee believes that CFS must carefully and critically analyze Program operations and ensure that any changes to Program policy or procedures must carefully consider how any changes affects CFS, foster parents and children in care. With any changes to program, policy and procedures CFS will need to ensure appropriate human, financial and technological resources are in place to support the change management processes. The Committee also believes that data should be collected and analyzed to ensure that any changes to the Program are actually meeting their intended objectives.

To view the full report, please visit the Department of Social Development and Housing website.